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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 KATHMANDU 001191

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SA/INS (REF YOUR CABLE 5166)

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SUBJECT: SECURITY FORCES' PROGRESS AND PITFALLS EAST OF KATHMANDU

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Government of Nepal (GON) security forces have made progress against Maoist insurgents over the last few months in the district directly east of Kathmandu, according to the Chief District Officer (CDO) and head of the local police. Maoist excesses, along with better cooperation between the police and army, have helped turn the tide in favor of the Government. Despite such progress, significant parts of the district remain under effective Maoist control, particularly at night, and more than half of the village-level leaders have fled their posts. The ability of police and military to ensure security much beyond district headquarters remains severely constrained, calling into question the ability of local authorities to administer upcoming elections in November. The security forces risk alienating the local population--and thus jeopardizing the gains made--by continued use of heavyhanded tactics. End summary.

SINDHUPALCHOWK IN A SNAPSHOT

2. (U) On early June poloff and POL FSN traveled to the district headquarters for Sindhupalchowk, directly east of Kathmandu. The district headquarters is 84 km from Kathmandu--about 25 km of which is over a winding, unpaved, one-lane road. Although traveling during daylight hours on a regular workday, the Embassy vehicle encountered little traffic--no more than a handful of trucks and buses (and no private cars or motorcycles)--on the entire round trip. (Note: The district headquarters lies away from the one good road in Sindhupalchowk, the Chinese-built Arniko Highway, which leads to the Chinese border. End note.)

3. (U) Sindhupalchowk District has a population of 350,000 and a per capita income of less than USD 100. About half of the population are members of the majority Nepali-speaking group (Brahmins, Chhetri, and lower castes); about 30 percent are ethnic Tamang. The principal occupation is farming, primarily maize, millet, and rice, on small holdings. Because of the hilly terrain, much of the cultivation is done by terracing. The district boasts 235 km of road, only about 25 percent of which is paved. Total electricity consumption does not exceed 10 MW, and there are only 215 telephone numbers (more than half of which are in the district headquarters) in use. There is one hospital and 54 higher secondary schools. The district reported a moderate amount of Maoist activity over the past year, with the most significant incident being the March 13 ambush of a police vehicle that killed six policemen. The insurgents have destroyed 70 local government offices in the district since the beginning of the insurgency, 28 of which were demolished in just the past two months.

CDO CITES SECURITY GAINS IN DISTRICT CAPITAL

4. (SBU) CDO Kabiraj Khanal said that he and the current Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) had only been at their posts for two months. Because the former CDO and former DSP did not like each other and could not work together, Khanal said, the security forces "were not moving around in the villages" on patrol, leaving the field clear for Maoist insurgents to operate unhindered. The Maoists had used the four-month ceasefire (July-November 2001), moreover, to entrench themselves in the district, recruiting new followers and establishing "jana sarkar" (people's governments) to replace nearly all Village Development Committees (VDC), the smallest unit of local government. (Note: Of 79 VDCs, 70 had "jana sarkar" when the state of emergency began in November. End note.) The security situation has been improving steadily since his arrival and the arrival of the new DSP, Khanal claimed. Aggressive joint patrolling by the Royal Nepal Army (RNA) and the police (albeit during daylight hours only) has helped reduce the Maoist grip on the district, Khanal said. The insurgents now exercise control in only "small, remote villages" several days' walk from the

district headquarters in good weather, are forced to move in STATE FOR SA/INS (REF YOUR CABLE 5166) smaller groups of only three or four to avoid detection, and must rely on smaller, more easily concealed weapons.

15. (SBU) Khanal noted proudly the surrender of about 800 Maoists in the district, of which total 700 turned themselves in during the past month. Nearly all such surrenders, he acknowledged, were of former "jana sarkar" officials (e.g., people's irrigation officer; people's forestry officer--"the Maoists have committees for everything")--rather than of hard-core fighters. Of the 70 "jana sarkar" operating at the onset of the emergency, 15 had officially surrendered and been reclaimed by the Government. He pointed to a group of 30-40 people milling about outside his office, identifying them as, for the most part, former Maoists who had surrendered and now must report on a regular basis to the CDO. Former Maoists determined to have held a higher position, such as village chief, are kept in custody. The district jail now houses 42 Maoist suspects, he reported, while "eight or nine" suspects had been killed in encounters with the security forces.

AND WHAT ABOUT ELECTIONS?

16. (SBU) Despite recent progress, security remains the greatest need in the district, Khanal said. Less than half of the district's 79 VDC Chairmen actually live in their villages, Khanal admitted (and some of those that do are in "jana sarkar" VDCs). Nonetheless, he said he did not anticipate significant difficulty in implementing the government's decision to hold elections November 13. Even in areas still effectively under Maoist control? poloff queried. Khanal optimistically reiterated that the situation is steadily improving and he anticipates no major problems.

TO GET GUERRILLAS,
ACT LIKE GUERRILLAS

17. (SBU) Poloff asked about a May 6 article in the vernacular press claiming the extrajudicial killing of six villagers in Thulo Sirubari, about 15 km from the district headquarters. The six killed were "active supporters" of the Maoists, the CDO asserted. Plainclothes RNA had moved into the village following an attempted ambush on a police vehicle in the area, he explained. The plainclothes soldiers were dressed like Maoists and moved around greeting villagers with the Maoist salute. One young man returned the greeting, and they struck up a conversation. When uniformed RNA arrived on the scene, according to Khanal, the young man tried to flee and was shot. The soldiers then surrounded the village and entered a house the dead man had earlier identified as pro-Maoist, killing five of the occupants.

18. (SBU) Poloff asked why the soldiers had shot, rather than arrested, the villagers, including a 70-year-old man, especially since, according to the CDO's account, no one was shooting at them. When you are fighting guerrillas, you must think like guerrillas, the CDO opined, adding that the soldiers could not have been sure that no one in the house had guns and whether they would be fired upon. (Note: Poloff did not have the opportunity to call upon the local RNA commander to hear his account of events. End note.)

POLICE POINT OF VIEW

19. (SBU) DSP Ganesh Ayer commands a force of 300 policemen. Before the emergency, there were 21 different police posts in the district. Because of the difficulty of defending isolated posts, however, that number has been cut back significantly. In addition to the district headquarters, police now maintain posts only in three locations, two of them in proximity to an RNA outpost. Despite this drawdown, Ayer corroborated the CDO's assertion that security has improved. The Maoists are no longer as powerful as they were, he stated, adding that nearly 10 people a day come in to surrender. People are beginning to trust the security forces now, especially since the Maoists "have shown their hand" by destroying village-level infrastructure and inflicting other atrocities on the local population. (Note: Maoists murdered five civilians in different locations in Sindhupalchowk during the month of May alone. End note.) Villagers are thus starting to volunteer good, solid information to the security forces. Stiffer patrols are interrupting the Maoists' supply lines, he reported; they are experiencing food shortages. Being so near the Chinese border--which is much more difficult to cross without proper documentation than the Indian border--is also helpful. Like the CDO, he said he anticipates no problem in holding elections in the troubled district on schedule. When asked why not--especially since most VDCs remain

Maoist-affected--he responded, "Because the Prime Minister has directed us" to provide adequate security for the elections.

OPPOSITION OUTLOOK

110. (SBU) District Development Committee (DDC) Vice Chairman Dhambar Aryal, a member of the Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxist Leninist (the largest Opposition political party), complained that political activities have been stalled because of the emergency. The emergency is "not good for politics," and will hinder the parties' ability to campaign, he predicted. He expressed some doubt that polling will be able to take place in all 79 VDCs.

111. (SBU) Since the beginning of emergency in November, he calculated that the Maoists had killed 11 civilians and the RNA 28, "some of whom may have been Maoists," concluding that "people have been doubly terrorized by the Maoists and the RNA." The RNA's practice of moving in plainclothes has made it difficult for the numerous political "opportunists" and fair-weather Maoists who may have become nominal members of the movement because that is what everyone else in the vicinity was doing. Those being apprehended are usually not hard-core Maoist strategists or fighters, he stressed, but rather village-level members of an erstwhile "jana sarkar." The DDC has a good relationship with the Army and police, however. If a villager believes his family member is being unjustly detained by the security forces, the DDC can usually resolve the problem by talking to the local commanders. The level of looting and extortion, so prevalent during the ceasefire, has declined during the emergency, he acknowledged. At times, the people have even gained the confidence to confront the Maoists, in one instance forcing the release of a local UML worker abducted by the insurgents. On the down side, the insurgency continues to stall development efforts in the area, he lamented. Civil servants do not want to work in remote health posts or schools in the district. A local road-building project has been put on hold after Maoists torched a bulldozer.

112. (SBU) Of the 28 civilians killed so far by the security forces, Aryal claimed at least three had been killed in error: one in a case of mistaken identity and two in crossfire. The RNA had admitted wrongdoing in one of the cases and paid the family compensation. Aryal corroborated most of what the CDO had reported about the young man attempting to flee the RNA and being killed in Thulo Sirubari. His account of the fate of the other five villagers varied somewhat, however. In Aryal's version, plainclothes RNA dressed like Maoists entered the village, carrying a uniformed policeman they had tied up. Pretending to be Maoists, the soldiers told the assembled villagers they had captured a policeman, and asked for their suggestions on what to do with this enemy of the people. The five who most enthusiastically volunteered such suggestions--and identified themselves as active Maoists in the process--were subsequently taken out to the jungle and shot, Aryal claimed.

COMMENT

113. (SBU) Although only a few hours away from Kathmandu, Sindhupalchowk seems far removed from the relative security, prosperity, and self-absorption of the capital. The security forces have undeniably made some progress, but their grip on areas much more than a few kilometers outside the district headquarters remains fragile. Much more will have to be done to bolster security not just in district headquarters, but also in more remote VDCs if credible elections are to be held in November. While the Army may have improved its ability to act on intelligence gleaned from local residents, the military risks alienating the population--and losing access to further intelligence--with its heavyhandedness. The Embassy will raise with the military leadership the May 5 events in Thulo Sirubari as part of our continuing human rights dialogue with the Royal Nepal Army.
MALINOWSKI